



PROJECT:

CONNECTED NEWSSTANDS

Reusing city infrastructure to enhance digital services for all.

Keywords: digital inclusion, connectivity, data interoperability, APIs, digitization

ABSTRACT

Traditional newsstands around the city can now issue official vital records documenting birth, death, and marriage as well as other certificates documenting residence, citizenship, and civil status. These “city certificates” were previously available only by physically visiting one of the City’s General Registry Offices or by requesting them online. Newsstand operators can voluntarily enroll in this program and charge a small fee for this service. Newsstands are given access to the certificates portal using the stands’ existing equipment. In the six months since it was launched, 13% of the City’s newsstands have already enrolled and now account for up to 15% of the City’s monthly demand. Additional work is being done to expand this program to banks, universities, and other organizations, improving the level of service to residents, increasing speed of service and reducing the burden on city staff.

CONTEXT

The Office of Digital Transformation and Citizen Services conducted a study to identify ways to improve digital service delivery to city residents. In collaboration with the General Registry Office, the Municipality found that “city certificates” were the most requested services across Milan’s nine districts. In keeping with the City’s user-centric values, it was determined that while there was a desire to access City services online, many residents lacked required knowledge, equipment, or ability to access the internet. Taking advantage of the newsstands’ existing connections between citizens, their communities, and information, the city expanded this urban infrastructure to be able to make Municipal services more widely accessible - without residents having to access a City facility.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Before this project could be made technically viable, the Municipality’s databases were reorganized to enhance data interoperability. Milan’s General Registry Office data was structured into one single data lake, observing national data privacy regulations. This repository paved the way for future scalability of the service. The project relies heavily on news vendors and their ability to navigate the General Registry Office’s online services. This was made possible through a series of trainings offered to the vendors that signed up to participate as Connected Newsstands.

STAKEHOLDERS

The project was designed by the Office of Digital Transformation in the Municipality of Milan and implemented by its Information Systems and Digital Agenda Department. Due to the collaboration between the Municipality, the news vendor’s Union, and the Association of Newsstands, the City was able to efficiently engage with news vendors.

IMPLEMENTATION

To begin the design process, the Municipality conducted research on the resident’s interactions with the General Registry Office and identified the most common services and certifications that residents were requesting. This user research also helped the Municipality identify the newsstands – *edicole* – as one of the most widely known and frequented retail points by senior citizens. Newsstands have an important historical and public value and are seen as a trustworthy access point to information with a high level of accessibility in neighborhoods and communities.



While the Municipality already had a citizen self-service portal allowing access to certificate information, the Municipality created a parallel website and built a custom interface, named Sipoweb, to allow newsstands specialized access to the General Registry Office database. This allows a third party – in this case the news vendors – to process citizens’ requests on their behalf and issue printed certificates as requested. Offering these services to citizens is voluntary for vendors, who may charge a 2-euro fee for a service that is otherwise free at the City’s General Registry’s Offices or through the Citizen Digital Folder online.

The digitization and reorganization of data, and the development of the required software applications, were done internally using the city’s existing resources. This included the development of the Connected Newsstands website that is used to issue the certificates, as well as delivering the training sessions the city offered to guarantee its smooth operation.

The design of the Connected Newsstands started in 2019, but its implementation had to be accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Having Connected Newsstands throughout the city’s districts offers two advantages: enhancing social distance and stay-at-home strategies by reducing the number of customers in the General Registry Offices and minimizing the need for citizens to travel to get to those offices.

LEARNINGS

Milan’s effort to bring digital services online, creating forward-thinking technology strategies and smart data management practices, are having a direct impact on the quality of life of the City’s residents. This experience opens the door to offering services through new, technological means, to citizens regardless of their digital abilities, thanks to the agreement and support of the news vendors’ unions.

The hard work of reorganizing the General Registry Office data has paid off. Rebuilding the database and creating an API to access “city certificates” allowed the City to stand-up the Connected Newsstands quickly. This project recognizes the historical and community importance of newsstands

and shows how cities can expand the use of existing urban infrastructure, using digital tools. This new foundation creates additional opportunities to streamline access to “city certificates”, to enable future expansion to “distributed offices”, enabling other approved entities to directly access these certificates online.

FUTURE

The City of Milan is working to enable other retail shops to serve as “distributed offices”, in the style of the Connected Newsstand, as some third-party private service-providers, such as utilities, already do. The long-term objective of the project is to eliminate the need for citizens to obtain a physical certificate and hand it over to a third party -whether it’s a bank, a university, or any authorized third-party institution, by enabling such third party to digitally obtain it on behalf of citizens directly from the municipal data lake.

This project is highly replicable by cities across Italy and around the world. It follows a Government-as-a-Service logic and utilizes existing urban infrastructure to engage citizens and third-party providers.

DATA AND NUMBERS



17 newly digitized Registry services now offered through newsstands.



APIs created to guarantee secure access to Municipality’s files and data.



1 mobile application developed to be used by news vendors.



82 newsstands enhanced as Distributed Offices for the General Registry (14% of the 580 newsstands in Milan as of April 2021).



In May 2020, 5.2% of “city certificates” were issued through a Connected Newsstand. By July, this percentage went up to 14.1%, surpassing the percentage of certificates issued by the General Registry in its physical offices (9.6%). The rest of the certificates are issued online.